

This past Sunday was the fourth anniversary of the horrific attacks of September 11th, 2001 which so shook our nation and our world. Solemnly and respectfully, men and women across the country carried out memorials which recalled the simple human tragedy of that day.

In Washington, however, the Pentagon decided to do something altogether different. It chose to deliberately politicize September 11th, to use the emotional impact of the deaths which occurred on that day to drum up support for its agenda and for the agenda of the Bush Administration. And it did so in a strikingly undemocratic way, leading a "Freedom Walk" which eliminated dissenting viewpoints from its midst, and even relegating our nation's independent and open media to the sidelines.

According to the Pentagon, the day's proceedings were designed to honor the memories of those lost to terrorism four years ago, and to support those men and women currently serving overseas in the armed forces. Both of these goals are laudable and wholly defensible. It goes without saying that the crimes committed against the people of New York and Washington should be preserved in our national consciousness, and all of us should sincerely hope and pray that our soldiers remain protected and return home safely from their tours of duty.

But the Freedom Walk wasn't really about either of these things. Instead, it was about linking the work of our armed forces to September 11th, and then fusing this combination to the current conflict underway in Iraq (though a logical connection doesn't exist). It was no accident that the singer chosen to perform at the concert which took place after the walk – Clint Black – is known for his song "Iraq and Roll."

While all Americans support the troops themselves, our war effort in Iraq has always been contentious. Today, at least half of the citizens of the United States believe that starting that conflict was a mistake. Seeking to maintain public support for the war effort, the Pentagon sought to bind the emotionally powerful events of September 11th to the Iraq conflict in a way which would make opposition to the latter appear to indicate disrespect for the former.

Wars must be the product of careful and cautious reasoning. Our nation must now ask itself, as objectively and dispassionately as it can, whether staying in Iraq makes sense, and if so, how long our forces should remain there. Such considerations should not be linked to charged feelings about the tragedy of four years ago. Doing so only hinders our collective ability to

honestly evaluate what is best for our troops, for the American people, and for the people of Iraq. In truth, using the victims of September 11th, 2001 to promote any particular policy agenda is an assault on free and independent thought relating to that agenda.

And indeed, the Freedom Walk was strikingly lacking in true freedom. All participants were required to register for it ahead of time. Reporters were not permitted to mingle with those who were walking, and instead were cordoned off in three marked areas. The route of the walk wasn't released to the public, and was demarcated with a four-foot fence. Protestors were kept at bay. A Pentagon spokeswoman said that the goal of organizers was to keep the event "sterile."

What, exactly, was the Pentagon afraid of? Why would they need to "sterilize" a September 11th memorial event? In truth, the obvious and embarrassing attempt of officials to carefully orchestrate the proceedings stemmed from their awareness that they had done something truly objectionable: they had used the unjust deaths of Americans to help quiet dissent and critical thought about an ongoing, deadly, and fundamentally important situation abroad. Since our Administration doesn't want to hear dissenting opinions on the conflict in Iraq, it naturally didn't want to hear them at its pre-planned event Sunday, either. In the end, the Freedom Walk betrayed itself.

And in the process, the proceedings served as an attack on both of the groups which it was theoretically supporting. The victims of September 11th had their tragedy used politically, instead of respectfully remembered. And the troops had the major official justification for their efforts overseas – the protection of freedom here at home – torn out from under their feet. How committed is our government to liberty and unfettered thought when its official organs make a point of silencing both of these great values whenever it suits them politically to do so?

We should always honor those unfairly lost in tragic events. We should always hope for the best for our fighting forces, and support them in any way that we can. But we should never use tragedy and heavy-handed measures to distort our thinking about the situations into which we introduce those forces. To do so is to disrespect those we have lost, and to forget what makes our way of life worth preserving.